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CHILD LABOR LEGISLATION IN THE CAROLINAS

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South Carolina

Prior to the legislative session of January-February, 1911, there were child labor laws in South Carolina providing for a sixty-hour week, factory inspection and a twelve-year age limit. But the twelve-year limit did not apply to orphans, or to the children of widowed mothers or totally disabled fathers. The law also permitted anybody's children under twelve to work during the summer months, provided they had attended school during the winter.

The South Carolina Child Labor Committee, at a meeting in November, 1910, decided to ask the legislature to pass a bill repealing the poverty exemptions, prohibiting work at night of children under sixteen, and gradually raising the age limit for day work to fourteen years. This legislative program was published and at once aroused the opposition of the manufacturers. At the next meeting of the committee in December, representative manufacturers were present and announced that they would not oppose elimination of all children under twelve, and abolition of night work for children under sixteen, but that they would fight any effort to advance the age limit above twelve years, unless compulsory education were coupled with the advance. They contended that if children up to fourteen years were neither in the mills nor in the schools, they would develop into a dangerous class of loafers and budding criminals. The committee either took fright at the attitude of the manufacturers or decided that it would be better to make as sure as possible of at least some improvement, and reconsidered its former action to the extent of striking out the most important feature of the proposed bill—that is, the raising of the age limit.

The mutilated bill was introduced early in the session in both

Senate and House and passed the Senate without difficulty. But it barely escaped defeat in the House, and doubtless would have failed to pass but for an earnest personal canvass of practically every legislator. The opposition in the House was composed of several elements: (1) certain owners of cotton mill stock, (2) politicians representing certain counties containing large numbers of factory voters, (3) legislators seeking political favors at the hands of other legislators, (4) sincere men who feared that the inflexible operation of the law would cause suffering to many worthy but unfortunate families. But despite the stubborn fighting of its opponents, the bill became a law, and it was encouraging to see that the friends of the bill were as strong in its favor as were its enemies in opposition.

The fight in the House made it clear that the chief difficulty in the way of all child labor legislation in South Carolina is the supposedly unfriendly attitude of the mill operatives. "Let us alone," is the constantly quoted answer to all appeals for improvement. Apparently there is a very large element of men in the factory villages who work very little, but who talk a great deal and vote in every primary. This seems to be the man, rather than the mill president, of whom the legislator is chiefly afraid. And presumably he desires to be let alone in order that he may live in idleness while his helpless children toil.

South Carolina's law now prohibits night work for children under sixteen, provides factory inspection, a sixty-hour week, and an absolute twelve-year age limit for day work. Naturally, the next step is to raise the age limit to fourteen years. And this will be no easy thing to do, as the combined opposition of both manufacturers and operatives may be expected. It is probably useless to hope for a change of heart on the part of the manufacturers, and I am convinced that about the only way to win over the operatives is by demonstrating to them that the competition of cheap child labor has the tendency to drag their own wages down. It is not fair to say that there are no parents among the operatives who are ambitious for their children and who oppose their exploitation; but even these are timid and fear to assert their wishes lest they may call down upon themselves the wrath of the mill owners. A cotton mill organization in South Carolina is a feudal system, wherein the operative is a vassal, one of whose feudal obligations is to do homage

to his lord, the mill president, for the privilege of grinding in his lord's mill and living in his lord's tenant house.

North Carolina

Aside from a thirteen-year age limit, North Carolina had, prior to 1911, practically no laws for the protection of her working children. The state child labor committee, as its legislative program for this year, proposed a bill providing for an advance of the age limit to fourteen years, for factory inspection, for a reduction from sixty-six hours a week to sixty, and prohibiting all children under sixteen from working at night. In the House the bill was referred to the committee on manufactures and labor, which committee was made up chiefly of cotton mill presidents, stockholders and others more or less identified with the mill interests. At the committee hearing the mill presidents of the state were on hand in unusually large numbers and fought the bill with great determination and considerable bitterness. The bill was reported out of committee unfavorably and likewise defeated when it came up for consideration in the House, notwithstanding it was ably defended on the floor.

In addition to the above bill advocated by the North Carolina Child Labor Committee, a separate bill providing simply for the reduction of hours to sixty per week had been introduced, and after the failure of the regular bill, the friends of the cause gave their help to further its passage. Also, they had a bill introduced to prohibit the night work of children under sixteen. The latter failed to pass, but the sixty-hour week bill has just passed both House and Senate and was approved by the governor. This represents the only forward step made in North Carolina at the legislative session of 1911.

The results of the fight this year seem to warrant the belief that in general the manufacturers of North Carolina strongly disfavor any degree of restriction for working children. Moreover they exert a very powerful influence on legislation. What has been done in other states is of small concern to them.

Besides, the factory owners represented that this was the worst possible time to restrict child labor, that the mills were all on the brink of failure, that tampering with the labor question might

close the mills, that it might be well enough to protect children, but that children had stomachs and must work in order to eat, and there would be no work for either parents or children when the mills had to shut down. It was this sort of argument which probably had most to do with defeating the regular bill. It was also represented that many North Carolina mills were very small and had to spin at night in order to provide for the looms by day.